

After Ferguson: Whose Lives Matter in America?

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Contents

- [Ferguson — The New Selma](#)
- [No Justice in New York](#)
- [Black Youth in the Lead](#)
- [Two Americas](#)

“People need to know that Black lives and Brown lives matter as much as white lives. We are all responsible now. The weight of history can’t be our excuse.”

—New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio after the Staten Island grand jury on December 3, 2014, refused to indict the cop who murdered Eric Garner.

RESPONDING TO MAYOR de Blasio’s obvious point, the New York City police “union” head said the mayor had thrown all cops under the bus by implying that police practices are racially based. Mayor de Blasio, a white man with a Black son, expressed a bitter truth that most white people deny — race and racism underpin police practice and U.S. society.

Significantly, the “Black Lives Matter” campaign is being joined by a growing number of whites. Most whites still believe, however, that race is never the issue when police arrest or kill Blacks. An overwhelming majority of whites in every poll agree with the grand juries and prosecutors who let the cops walk free, no matter what violence/murders cops commit.

The facts show just the opposite, that police across the country target African Americans and other minorities for petty charges that have led to mass incarceration, severe brutality and death. Eric Garner was alleged to be selling “loosies” (single cigarettes) as the reason for his arrest.

Despite the oblivious majority of white people, there is growing resistance to the vicious racism of the criminal justice system. The Black-led protests that began in Ferguson in the summer have spread to New York and cities large and small. It is forging a new movement for fundamental change.

Historically, the turning points in race relations in a country built by slaves and cheap African-American and other minorities’ labor occurs when progressive-minded whites join with Black popular resistance. It happened in the civil rights movement in the 1960s, which inspired a youth radicalization that challenged the ruling class policies on war, women’s rights and other social issues.

We are at an early stage of this happening today. President Obama, representing the ruling class’s interests, understands this better than any previous president. His objective is to contain the outrage and limit changes to the militarized police forces.

The first Black attorney general, Eric Holder, has opened civil rights investigations in Florida,

Missouri, Ohio and New York. The Republican Party, which relies more and more on its anti-immigrant, race-denial base is leading the charge to oppose changes to police tactics.

An op-ed article in *The New York Times* (December 5, 2014) by Eric L. Adams, a retired captain and co-founder of “100 Blacks in Law Enforcement Who Care,” headlined “We must stop abuse of Black men,” gives an example that every Black American knows to the bone:

“One of my white fellow officers once told me that if he saw a white individual with a gun, he took extra care for himself and the individual. When he saw a Black individual with a gun, he took care only for himself.”

While the starting point of this tug of war on race relations is Black anger and protest — without which there can never be a successful challenge to institutional racism — changing the attitude of a majority of whites, who are oblivious to the reality of Two Americas going back to British colonial rule, is key to bringing fundamental change to the system of injustice.

There is a practical social, psychological and economic advantage to living in a white skin. It’s the central reason that whites and Blacks for the most part see everything about the legal system differently.

Ferguson — The New Selma

Ferguson, Missouri can be the new Selma, Alabama. In 1963 Martin Luther King was attacked as an “outside agitator” and “communist,” but Selma showed the determination of the civil rights movement against state violence upholding legal segregation. It galvanized the country and led the ruling class to stomp down on its southern wing to grant legal equality to African Americans.

Without those fundamental changes, Barack Obama would not be president.

The white counter offensive to Black rights began immediately in the 1970s as affirmative action programs and “forced busing” for equality came under attack. Since Obama’s election the racist drive to roll back gains, including voting rights, has accelerated.

Ferguson, a small St. Louis suburb, has taken center stage in the resistance. It became a wakeup call for millions of African Americans who are fighting racial inequality and our second-class status.

No one in Black Ferguson, Black St. Louis County, and Black America was surprised when the grand jury and its biased prosecutor “declined” to charge officer Darren Wilson in the killing of young Michael Brown. No one in Black America was surprised that the prosecutor used the occasion instead to indict the dead Brown and the 16 of 18 eyewitnesses (calling them liars) who said he had raised his hands to the cop to surrender.

Brown was called a criminal by the prosecutor, who accepted Wilson’s words that Brown looked like a “demon” and a “hulk-like figure” who thought he could go through bullets and kill him. That’s the misinformation theme in white America that is spit out daily by rightwing talk radio and television commentators.

When African Americans say, “Black lives don’t matter” in America, it is not hyperbole but based on centuries of experience of white supremacy, in laws (de jure) and in action (de facto).

No Justice in New York

The Ferguson grand jury decision was not an outlier. When a Staten Island, New York, grand jury declined to indict the cop who used an illegal choke hold that killed 43-year-old Eric Garner, the protests were immediate and included a broader unity of races than even Ferguson.

The Garner murder was on video and everyone saw at least five cops pile on an unarmed Black man. The medical examiner had declared Garner's death a "homicide by chokehold." Garner was minding his own business when assaulted and killed by the cops (only one was even referred to the grand jury).

The largest circulation newspaper in the city, *The Daily News*, headlined its front page: "We Can't Breathe." Garner had said to the cop choking him, "I can't breathe," at least 11 times.

The cops left him on the ground like a dead animal. The EMTs did nothing too even though Garner still had a pulse. No CPR. No attempt to provide air to his lungs. He died on the way to the hospital.

The private citizen who filmed the gang in blue has since been harassed and arrested by the cops.

Supporters of the secret grand jury system and the police blame Garner for his own death because, they claim, he resisted arrest. Further, they argue, it's not the cops' fault he was overweight and had health issues. Some charge that Blacks commit more crimes than whites, so cops must be aggressive to protect their own lives.

This is a typical diversion argument of those supporting the racist status quo. White crime and Black crime are similar, but arrests and incarcerations are divergent. For example, white on white homicides (83% according to FBI data) is almost as prevalent as so-called Black on Black homicides (90%).

Grand juries always indict — except when it comes to cops, where we see prosecutors convening grand juries to avoid bringing charges. The sick joke is that prosecutors can indict a ham sandwich. From 2009-2010, secret grand juries at the federal level pursued 160, 0000 cases for possible charges. Of those the grand juries voted not to indict only 11 times (less than .00001%). The data for state and county grand juries are similar.

Black Youth in the Lead

The most significant outcome of Ferguson is the rise of a new movement for justice and fairness led by young Black activists. These Black youth are standing up and organizing in Ferguson, New York and across the country. They are not waiting for the Old Guard, the Black elected officials, or taking the bait from many liberals mouthing that "protests don't accomplish much, only elections do."

The youth-led movement has set up numerous organizations. They have worked together and independently. They rallied and marched shouting, "Black Lives Matter," not just for Michael Brown and Eric Garner but other Blacks gunned down by cops across the country.

Robin D. G. Kelley, in *Counterpunch* (November 25, 2014), "Why We Won't Wait, Resisting the War Against the Black and Brown Underclass" points to the new leaders of the protest movement:

"The young organizers in Ferguson from Hands Up United, Lost Voices, Organization for Black

Struggle, Don't Shoot Coalition, Millennial Activists United, and the like, understand they are at war. Tef Poe, Tory Russell, Montague Simmons, Cheyenne Green, Ashley Yates, and many other young Black activists in the St. Louis area have not been waiting around for an indictment.

"Nor are they waiting for the much vaunted federal probe, for they have no illusions about a federal government that provides military hardware to local police, builds prisons, kills tens of thousands by manned and unmanned planes without due process, and arms Israel in its illegal wars and occupation. They have been organizing.

"So have the young Chicago activists who founded We Charge Genocide and the Black Youth Project, and the Los Angeles-based youth who make up the Community Rights Campaign, and the hundreds of organizations across the country challenging everyday state violence and occupation. They remind us, not only that Black lives matter — that should be self-evident — but that resistance matters.

"It matters because we are still grappling with the consequences of settler colonialism, racial capitalism and patriarchy. It mattered in post-Katrina New Orleans, a key battleground in neoliberalism's unrelenting war on working people, where Black organizers lead multiracial coalitions to resist the privatization of schools, hospitals, public transit, public housing, and dismantling public sector unions. The young people of Ferguson continue to struggle with ferocity, not just to get justice for Mike Brown or to end police misconduct but to dismantle racism once and for all, to bring down the Empire, to ultimately end war."

Two Americas

In this context, the words of Martin Luther King in a 1968 speech, "The Other America," are relevant. While King never advocated violent and destructive behavior, he also said it would be "morally irresponsible" to condemn riots that occurred in Detroit and other cities in response to oppression "without," he said, "at the same time, condemning the contingent, intolerable conditions that exist in our society."

"These conditions," he explained, "are the things that cause individuals to feel that they have no other alternative than to engage in violent rebellions to get attention. And I must say tonight that a riot is the language of the unheard."

African Americans have only had basic constitutional rights enforced for less than 50 years (1964 to the present). The 15th Amendment adopted after the Civil War was never implemented in the South and only partially in the rest of the country. (The amendment says, "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.")

America is not a unified nation-state based on equal rights and fairness for all its citizens. It is a white-dominated country with smaller subnational groups that continuously are discriminated against and seen as less than human, and certainly less than whites.

The Black community more than any other group supports a nonracial, colorblind and fair society based on merit and equality. We are still waiting.

While class issues are a factor in race relations, white workers tragically are some of those most opposed to justice for Michael Brown and Eric Garner, and likely to buy the lies of the cops. They see their "white community" under attack by demon-like Black men. If a white cop says he feared for his life by an unarmed Black teenager or man, in their eyes, it is obviously true.

Bigoted attitudes cannot be overturned by new training or education, or cameras on cops. (The very idea that cameras are needed indicates the depth of the problem.) Rooting out racist police brutality requires that the government take affirmative legal action, backed by force. It starts with removal from the job without pay, firings, arrests and public trials.

It means independent police oversight commissions must be created, controlled by communities suffering from police violence. Community control of police is essential. Local cops must live in the communities they patrol. When cops know they are accountable and will face immediate penalties, a different outcome is possible and likely.

The ruling-class fears popular Black-led resistance more than anything else. That's why liberals and conservatives alike falsely tell protesters that change is only possible by the ballot box. Malcolm X said the oppressors only understand Black Power. A determined minority, fired up, he pointed out, can become the majority.

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P.S.

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